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The Kingdom of Kush

Kush was an ancient kingdom in what is today northern Sudan. Despite lasting for 3,000 years, many people have never heard of it. A leading Sudanese archaeologist Dr Shadia Taha, whose perspective informs and inspires much of this chapter, holds that the history of ancient Sudan has been obscured by Egypto-centric scholars. Most of the archaeologists who went to work in Sudan were Egyptologists, who saw Sudan as a colony or 'offshoot' of Egyptian culture that always copied Egypt and was just 'a recipient of knowledge from there'. Dr Taha believes that 'both countries influenced each other . . . ancient Sudan was an advanced civilisation [that in its earliest form] predated Babylon, ancient Greece and Rome . . . but has never received the credit it deserves'.

The US-trained archaeologist George Reisner epitomised the kind of Egypto-centricity Dr Taha describes: upon seeing some of the ruins of ancient Sudan in 1918 he wrote, 'The native negroid race had never developed either its trade

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or any industry worthy of mention, and owed their cultural position to the Egyptian immigrants and to the imported Egyptian civilisation.'[1] Such views began to be challenged with the construction of the Aswan High Dam in Egypt in the 1960s. This civil project necessitated the displacement and relocation of tens of thousands of people in both southern Egypt and northern Sudan, triggering fears that Sudan's undiscovered heritage would be lost forever and stimulating interest in its ancient past. While progress has since been made, Sudan is a huge country that is still underexplored and insufficiently researched. The punishing heat of the Sudanese desert means progress has been painfully slow; archaeological digs are only possible a few months a year. Furthermore, archaeology, as is the case across most of Africa, has received far less government funding over the decades than other subject areas such as science, technology and medicine.

This part of Africa's story is very special to me since Kush is the region of Sudan from where my family hails, and so, as I stitched together the magical threads of the lives of Kushites long gone and visited the relics of their civilisation, I experienced a frisson of wonder that a country which today is synonymous with misrule, conflict and underdevelopment once had such a great history. It is that same instability and lack of investment which has, by contrast with Egypt, stymied tourism in Sudan for so long. To this day, the paucity of guests in their country makes the Sudanese extraordinarily hospitable to those who do visit.

The Kushites' achievements were impressive: treasures and objects have been found including exquisitely decorated ceramic pottery, dating as early as 8000 BCE, which, according to Dr Taha, predate any pottery found in Egypt by some 3,000 years. The Kushites also built 1,000 pyramids; 250 are still standing or have kept part of their superstructure. Their

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richly decorated interiors contained the treasures, furniture and personal belongings of the deceased king or queen, though these have long been plundered or removed for display in museums, with only the wall paintings remaining. The best-preserved collection of pyramids is at Al Begrawiya, around 250 kilometres north of Khartoum. There, in the vast expanse of the Sudanese Sahara Desert, dozens of pyramids loom upwards seemingly in the middle of nowhere. The change in climate over the centuries has since rendered the Kushites' region – blessed with lakes, grasslands and choruses of birdsong – into a relentless ocean of sand.

I find the link between the old and new in Sudan endlessly fascinating. That some customs last even to the present day is marvellous; history cannot simply be consigned to the past. My visit one afternoon to a mudbrick house in a small settlement in the quiet town of El Kurru, nestling at the foothills of the ancient mountain of Jebel Barkal, in northern Sudan, proved this point. The women welcomed me warmly, dressed in multicoloured Sudanese saris – the *tobe*. They took me around their home and showed me the earthenware water urns called *zeers*, their *angereb* or beds made of wooden posts with rope mattresses, ostrich feather fans and ceramic incense burners. These are some of the same objects the Kushites used. The women's eyes were made up with black kohl liner like the Kushite women I had spotted in temple reliefs, they wore gold bangles, put henna on their hands and they sported similar plaited hairstyles. One elderly woman bore facial scars, which also existed in the Kushite era, though scarification has now practically disappeared in northern Sudan.

Like many Sudanese today, ordinary Kushites were farmers who kept livestock and grew plentiful crops in the floodplains of the Nile. The Kushites did not fish there; in

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fact, they considered eating fish an abomination, perhaps because of its smell and tendency to grow putrid in the heat. This age-old abhorrence still influences modern-day Sudanese, whose fish consumption is one of the lowest in the world; it is just over 1 kilogram per person per year compared to nearly 25 kilograms in Egypt. One of my brothers has never eaten fish all his life and we joke that it must be his genetic memory at play.

The First Kingdom of Kush, Kerma, c. *2500–1450 BCE*

I wanted to learn more about the origins of Kush and so I sought out the expertise of both Dr Shadia Taha and archaeologist Dr Abdul Rahman Ali, the director of Sudan's National Museum in Khartoum. By 2500 BCE, one of the earliest city settlements in Africa and the world had established itself in Kerma (modern-day Karima) about 350 kilometres north of Khartoum. The region was accessible through the Nile southwards to Ethiopia and northwards to Egypt and the wider Mediterranean, and it was also well-connected to desert trade routes both west to Libya and southwest to sub-Saharan Africa. Its strategic position helped it become a major centre for intra-African trade.

Although the Kushites had to rely on oxen and donkeys for transportation of goods, for the camel had not yet been introduced, I gained an idea of how gruelling these desert routes must have been when I came across a camel train during a trip to Dongola in northern Sudan. The temperature must have been at least 40°C, though the climate would have been cooler in ancient times. The exhausted camel driver said that it was a journey lasting a total of 45 days. After a short excursion on one of his camels, I wished him

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good luck, bade him farewell, and bid a hasty and grateful retreat to the air-conditioning of my vehicle.

The city at Kerma would have been populated by people living in mudbrick homes such as the one I had visited at El Kurru. These were built around 'dafufas', which are huge, striking edifices constructed of the same material. The dafufas are large and imposing, dominating the flat expanse of desert under the baking heat, and alongside them are the clear archaeological remains of what would have been a large and sprawling urban settlement.

Of the two still standing, the western dafufa has three storeys and is 18 metres tall; it is believed to have been the residence of the native ruler of Kush. The eastern one is a funerary chapel surrounded by a cemetery of mound graves. About 30,000 graves discovered there give us a valuable insight into the Kerma civilisation. Traditional Kerma graves are marked by a dome-shaped tumulus of earth outlined by

[Caption to come]

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a ring of black stones, and sprinkled over with white pebbles. Inside the grave, bodies were placed on the right-hand side of a bed with a wooden headrest, along with a pair of sandals and pottery for use in the afterlife – an ostrich feather was a dashing final touch. Such treatment was probably not for the masses, only for local princes and their families. I remember my late father telling me that as a little boy growing up in the far north of Sudan in the 1930s, he had memories of people leaving pots and pans in the graves of newly deceased relatives.

The settlement at Kerma, which united many communities in northern Sudan, was contemporary with the first dynasties of the Egyptian Old Kingdom, and the two traded together from the start through the Nile, with Kerma supplying Egypt with goods from the African interior, including gold, ebony, ivory, animal skins and ostrich feathers, in return for grain, linen and wood. Between 1780 to 1580 BCE, Kerma's vibrant tradition of craftsmanship produced fine objects

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such as delicate pottery, stoneware, jewellery and bronze mirrors. Similar to contemporaneous Egyptian artefacts, they demonstrate that these civilisations learned from each other, having developed from a common origin in prehistoric times. Recent research by Sudanese academics suggests that expertise in enamelling pottery and dyeing fabric first emerged in Kush before reaching Egypt. The columns of the dafufas are believed to have been decorated in a blue glazed ceramic coating, which would have looked rather splendid.

While trade flowed up and down the Nile, the Kushites had similar religious practices to the Egyptians, worshipping gods such as Osiris and Isis, whom they called 'Mistress of Kush'. In addition to these, they had their own unique deity: the lion-god Apedemak, the god of war, for whom they built great temples. The Kushite kings were also fervent worshippers of the ram-headed god, Amun Ra, and his power was universal. They frequently dedicated their womenfolk to his service. Amun may have been a local deity of Egyptian Thebes, but Dr Taha cites evidence that the Kushites had independently considered the ram to be sacred. The Kushites (and Egyptians) believed Amun Ra resided inside the holy mountain at Jebel Barkal, near Karima, about 350 kilometres north of the capital Khartoum, and for centuries its kings were buried at the site. The mountain still has special significance for the local population, now all Muslim: several women I encountered just outside Karima said they enjoyed regular excursions to the mountain, with one of them telling me she felt intense relief whenever she went there. Its temples are considered sacred.

Relations between Kerma and Egypt could by turns be hostile or friendly – as the remains of defensive forts in southern Egypt attest. Each raided the other, with the balance of

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power swinging back and forth. As mentioned, five of the River Nile's six cataracts are in modern-day Sudan, only one is in Egypt. This gave the Kushites an excellent natural defence against attacks by boats from the north. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, noted when describing a journey in northern Sudan: 'sharp rocks, some showing above water, and many just awash, make the river impracticable for boats'.

However, by 1550 BCE, ancient Egypt had entered its golden age. Queen Hatshepsut had expanded trading links so much that she coveted the Kushites' control of trans-African trade. Hatshepsut's successor, Thutmose III, sent an army up the Nile past the first two cataracts and defeated the people of Kerma in 1525 BCE. In about 1450 BCE, the rulers of Kerma decided to relocate their power base farther south to Napata on the west bank of the River Nile, between its third and fourth cataracts (about 400 kilometres north of modern-day Khartoum), perhaps better to protect themselves from the Egyptians. Dr Shadia Taha believes their move was mostly motivated by economic and religious reasons: Napata was an excellent location for trans-Saharan trade and they were now closer to their sacred mountain of Jebel Barkal.

By the end of the first millennium BCE Egypt's power declined. As Egypt became engulfed by its internal rivalries it paid little attention to its southern neighbour, meaning the kingdom at Napata could develop free of external interference. A few centuries later, in the eighth century BCE, the Kushites would reach the height of their power during a period of history often seen as the beginning of western Classical antiquity, when ancient Greece was founding colonies in the east Mediterranean and Rome was still a quiet backwater in Southern Europe.

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